

Rotating Extension Column
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Alternative Crop Study Tour to Bear Fruit

Farmers in some areas of the country are finding unusual ways of increasing their profit and in many cases, saving the family farm. This is most often being accomplished by adding one or more specialty crops or other enterprises to the existing operation. Examples include agri-tourism and entertainment, community supported agriculture, specialty vegetable production, cut flower production and fruit production.

Some farmers are also adding value, and increasing the profit margin, by processing and packaging their products before they are offered for sale. "Alternative agriculture" is the catch phrase that is used to describe these and many other farm related businesses that differ from "normal" farming that is being done in a particular geographical area.

Some traditional farms are expected to make similar changes over the next few years. Low commodity prices and increasing production costs for the traditional crops are putting pressure on even our best producers. Obviously, not every farm operation will find it necessary to make major changes, but many are exploring their options.

I have just returned from a six month study tour of successful alternative agricultural enterprises. The purpose of the study tour was to visit and learn how farmers have transitioned to, or established more profitable operations on their farm. Since marketing is the key to success in these kinds of operations, this component received special emphasis during the tour.

During the study tour, stops were made in fourteen states and two Canadian provinces. Extension Agricultural Agents in the various places helped to coordinate and host visits in each area, making for efficient use of our time. Since the planning stage for the study tour began months ahead, Agents were

able to schedule and show the best examples of alternative agriculture in their county or region.

A total of ninety nine agricultural establishments were visited, with an average of about two hours spent with each owner or manager. During this time, many questions were asked and informal discussions were held. All people interviewed were very cooperative and willing to share in-depth information concerning the establishment and management of their agricultural operation.

Sixty pages of typed, single spaced notes resulted from these conversations and my personal observations. Approximately 1,000 digital photographs were made and these are being used to further document the visits. I now have the daunting task of compiling this information and organizing it in a way that would be useful to those who are interested in alternative agricultural enterprises.

It is tempting, in my eagerness to share all that was learned, to list all ninety nine stops with brief comments. This however, would not do justice to the many people who helped to support, plan, schedule and host the study tour. Instead, the plans are to periodically lift a single stop from my tour notes and go into more detail. Just to get started.....

There is the story of a couple in rural North Mississippi that commercially grows tomatoes in bales of hay. They also offer a corn maze that is designed using a GPS unit and a special computer program, as well as a fall harvest festival. Near Atlanta, there is a family of four making a living producing fruits, vegetables and brown eggs on two and one-half acres.

There is a nursery that produces only Hostas in rural North Carolina and sells 75 percent of them via the internet. This nursery began with 50 one gallon plants and has grown steadily for 18 years. The owners now have an attractive eighteen thousand square foot retail and staging area for shipping. Down the road there is a specialty nursery that grows trees exclusively for forest regeneration. They use only local stock for producing their plants and grow them in small containers for easier transport and planting in rough terrain.

A young couple decided to establish a winery in middle Tennessee. They began by planting three acres of grapes in 2001. Their first wine entered in

competition, a strawberry wine, won an international gold medal, and five more have been won since. By the way, their most popular wine is blackberry. They are currently producing 1,000 gallons annually and plan to double production next year.

These are just a few examples of the many places visited during the study tour and there is an interesting and educational story behind every one. If I receive the slightest encouragement from readers, I will be happy to elaborate in future articles.